



Public Affairs Office

George Washington Carrier Strike Group
Box 10
FPO AE 09550-2873

Phone : (757) 445-6155
e-mail : pao@washington.navy.mil

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GW, CVW 17 Conduct COMREL in St. Maarten

by Chief Journalist (SW/AW/IUSS) Henry W. Rice, George Washington Carrier Strike Group Public Affairs Office

USS GEORGE WASHINGTON, St. Maarten, Netherlands Antilles - USS George Washington (CVN 73) (GW) and the embarked air wing, Carrier Air wing Seventeen completed 1,246 hours of community service at various locations in St. Maarten, Netherlands Antilles April 15.

Two hundred and seventy seven Sailors volunteered to work at local schools, a home for the elderly, an orphanage and other locals throughout the Island to demonstrate the willingness of the Navy to work with local communities in the region in humanitarian assistance and community relations projects.

"This COMREL effort went phenomenally well," said Capt. Garry White, GW's commanding officer. "It is important that Sailors serve in an ambassador's role during port visits. Events like this are great, because there is positive interaction between the Navy and the local community."

Sailors were out painting fences, benches and playground equipment at three schools. Other Sailors did some handy work and clean up at a house inhabited by an elderly blind woman. A vegetable garden was being cultivated at a local orphanage and CVW 17 Sailors were moving rocks and entertaining the children.

"Community projects like this are important, because we in the Navy have an opportunity to help those who are less fortunate," said AD First Class (AW) Gerald Reed from Helicopter Anti-submarine Squadron 7 (HS 7). "We've got a bunch of Sailors out here from different squadrons and people with different backgrounds and we are working hard together, making a difference. It is good for morale."

GW anchored off the coast of St. Maarten, and although many people could see the ship, few could actually tour the ship. Asha Stevens, the community relations coordinator for the local Navy League and the superintendent of the Hillside Christian School, said the Sailors' visit and work will be remembered for a long time.

"These children could not make it to the ship, so the Sailors came to the ship," said Stevens. "It is so wonderful that these Sailors took the time to help the school and the community. When the ship leaves, they will leave a legacy. The children will remember this day for a long time to come."

Stevens was impressed with the number of volunteers from GW, as well as their eagerness to work hard. "This is just great. The admiral, the captain, the chaplains, everyone is out here helping," she said.

“They can all be at the beach, lying in the sun or sightseeing, but they chose it come out here and help. We are grateful, and this speaks volumes to our community.”

GW Sailors have some experience with community relations projects. During 2005, they completed more than 25,000 hours of volunteer work in Newport News. Being overseas offers the Sailors a chance to meet and interact with peoples of different cultures.

“Doing community service gives me a chance to interact with local people,” said Storekeeper Second Class Neathra Stanberry from GW’s supply department. “I found that these children are just like what I was like when I was younger. Even though we are in a foreign country, you learn that people are people. I had a great time.”

GW is in the Caribbean Sea for “Partnership of the Americas,” a maritime training and readiness deployment of U.S. Naval forces with countries from the Caribbean and Latin America, in support of U.S. Southern Command objectives for enhanced maritime security.